

Preparing a New Breed of Principals: Leadership from the University President's Office

Under the leadership of President Paul Stanton, East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is demonstrating the power of higher education partnerships to improve the quality of life in local communities and to accelerate school improvement and student achievement. In this interview, Stanton describes how participation in the SREB Leadership Initiative supports ETSU's efforts to redesign its educational leadership programs to meet the leadership needs of today's schools.

East Tennessee State University is a charter member of the SREB Leadership Initiative and the faculty in your educational leadership division are deeply involved in our University Leadership Development Network. From a university president's perspective, why is it important for ETSU to make the school leadership program a high priority on campus?

Our university is in the business of preparing school leaders, and we have to pay attention to what our customers need. Our customers are school systems that are operating in a very demanding accountability environment. When we prepare school leaders today, we're preparing individuals who are expected to lead schools to levels of success that go far beyond what was once expected. They have to know a lot about how students learn, what effective teaching looks like, and how to help their faculties work together to reach important academic goals. And they have to be deeply committed to the work they're doing — they have to care about their faculty and staff, and especially their students and their success.

Today's school leaders need a different mindset. They need to be focused on measurable outcomes. They need to be constantly looking at their performance data and feeding it back into a process of continuous improvement. If you're leading a school or system and you don't know how to set clear goals and objectives, and measure your outcomes, you're not going to make any progress.

It's our job in the university to educate these school leaders, so our programs and curriculums have to match the needs of today's school administrators. Our involvement with the SREB Leadership Initiative is one important way that we are making sure that our programs *do* meet those needs.

Someone compared your school leadership initiative here at East Tennessee State to the way a physician works in an office practice. As a member of the medical profession, how does that analogy strike you?

I see the parallel. It's our belief that if you are going to try to help address a problem, you need to begin by listening, just like a good doctor does. If you don't do a lot of listening first, you're not going to be able to prioritize and set the right goals and objectives.

So we've gone out and listened to the educators in our community. What do the schools need to make them more effective? Here in northeast Tennessee, we have some 13 different school districts represented on a board we call UETEC — Upper East Tennessee Educational Cooperative. The superintendents from those districts meet monthly with our Dean of Education to discuss the issues most important to them. The issues may be different from one system to another system, but as university and school leaders sit around the table together, we all participate in the diagnosis of the problems.

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The educational leadership folks and policy analysis folks from our College of Education are also going out in the schools, where they can see firsthand what the issues are. And the issues that schools face today are daunting. No Child Left Behind and other federal and statewide initiatives create major hurdles, and we are looking for ways that we can help the schools in our region meet these challenges.

As we listen to educators, one message keeps coming through loud and clear. Schools cannot meet the enormous challenges they face without well-prepared leaders who know how to listen and how to use what they learn to help the professionals in their schools solve problems together and move forward. Developing highly effective school leaders is a top priority today.

Will you reflect for a moment on the work that needs to be done to assure that we have an adequate pool of effective school leaders?

From the higher education side of the equation, we have to acknowledge that many university leadership preparation programs do not place enough emphasis on the skills that are necessary to lead schools in today's challenging educational environment.

The school superintendents in our region tell us they cannot find enough principals who know how to lead schools to high performance. They are not talking about a shortage in *quantity*. There are still plenty of individuals around who have administrative degrees and credentials. Our superintendents are concerned about the shortage in *quality*. They're looking for a new breed of school leaders who are in sync with our nation's scaled-up expectations for public education. They expect university graduate programs to be able to prepare this new breed of leaders, and I think that's a reasonable expectation.

When a university establishes an educational leadership program, that university is making the statement that "we know how to prepare school leaders who will be effective in today's schools." If East Tennessee State University is going to be in the educational leadership business, we have a responsibility to make sure our programs maintain a high standard of quality and meet the needs of our K-12 educational partners.

You've referred several times to the *partnership* between universities and the public schools. Why is *partnership* important?

What has become very clear to me over the years is that those of us in higher education have a real stake in the performance of the public schools. In times past, we didn't communicate all that much with educators in the K-12 system. We just wanted them to send us students, and the more students they sent, the faster we grew and the more money we got from the state. It was that way in most of the nation. We didn't communicate much. We didn't know much about their problems, their barriers, and they didn't know much about ours.

Now I think we're all coming to see that we're in this education enterprise together — that our political leaders and the public expect that we will work together to produce educated citizens who will contribute to our communities and our state and nation. When the public looks at us, they don't see elementary and secondary and higher education. They just see "Education" with a capital "E" and they expect us to get the job done.

I think most higher education institutions are doing a good job reaching out and building stronger relationships with the schools they serve. But I also think that we can all do better. There is no more important priority for me than to do everything I can to assure that we are effectively educating our school leaders of the future. They'll be preparing our future students, and if universities want quality students, we need to be an active partner in their education long before they ever reach our campuses.

How is your own educational leadership program changing?

We have a faculty team at ETSU that is really rebuilding our leadership curriculum to reflect what is important for today's school leaders to be able to do. We've been working on this for some time, with support from the Danforth Foundation and other sources. Thanks to our involvement with the SREB Leadership Initiative, we've been able to accelerate that work by incorporating the Initiative's 13 success factors into our curriculum revisions. SREB has given us guidelines that can help us improve our program and build lasting relationships with the schools that look to us to help prepare the leaders they need.

One thing we are doing in our leadership preparation program that we believe is critically important — we work with faculty teams. We combine full-time faculty members with part-time and adjunct faculty members so that we have a strong mix of theory and practice. They team-teach

our leadership courses. And our courses and internship opportunities are designed in ways that also allow our graduate students to spend real quality time in outlying schools, working under the tutelage of successful leaders.

Our commitment to developing school leaders reflects ETSU's total commitment to the idea that all of our students — graduate and undergraduate — need to be leaders in their fields. We want them to be the new leaders of the future in the communities around us. They're heavily involved in service learning and volunteerism. Last year we put in 75,000 volunteer hours from our faculty, staff and students. We see ETSU as a university without walls. We want our faculty, our staff, and our students to be in the community as much as possible, and we want the community to be in the university as much as possible.

The partnerships we are building with the schools and school systems in our region around this leadership work open the door to many new opportunities for the university and the communities we serve. The potential support — both financial and otherwise — that can grow out of such partnerships is enormous.

What is the role of a university president in the hard work of reforming educational leadership preparation programs?

The president has to be involved. It's not the president's job to teach the courses or get into the "nitty-gritty" of course redesign. But the support from the president's office is critically important. We have to put out the message that this work is a high priority in the university. If we don't do that, the work may not get done. Improvement has to be a top-down and a bottom-up process, and we all have to be working together with the same belief that this is essential to our mission.

Part of our leadership redesign requires our faculty to be more involved directly in the schools — to spend more time working with our leadership degree candidates in the actual settings where they will one day be expected to be highly effective. It's my job as the leader of this institution to send signals that I value and support this aspect of our preparation program.

When we started our first Kellogg Foundation project at ETSU in 1991, we had to change our way of doing business in promotion and tenure. We knew we were going to have people out in very rural communities, working directly with people who needed our expertise. They were not going to be writing the types of academic publications that we've expected in the past, or spending as much time working on campus committees. By recognizing these new

roles in our promotion and tenure system, we made a clear statement about the value of the work our faculty members would be doing in those rural communities. That's how presidents can help set priorities — by letting everyone know that the university recognizes this kind of hands-on involvement as an appropriate role for faculty members, a role that will be rewarded when it comes time for promotion and tenure.

How are you sending this message to the faculty in your Educational Leadership program in difficult economic times?

We've just named a new permanent dean for our College of Education and I've made it clear to him that I see our Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) program as one of the stars or jewels in our crown. Out of hundreds of programs on our campus, the ELPA department is one of our highest priorities because of the importance of the work they do and the superior quality of our faculty. So, they're going to get priority dollars.

SREB's research into effective leadership development has revealed a critical need for much stronger internship and school-based experiences that allow future principals to work on the real problems of schools throughout their preparation programs. How do universities and school systems make the case for funding substantive field-based leadership training?

The first step, of course, is university leaders and district superintendents working together. Our Upper East Tennessee Educational Cooperative is an action-oriented group. We identify and work on tasks together, and we are effective because they trust us and we trust them.

The real challenge, I think, is helping state decision makers understand why these joint efforts, which are more expensive than what we've done in the past, are worth the investment. We have to point out to policymakers the kind of price we will pay if we don't get busy preparing effective new school leaders. We need to make the case that the high performance we're all expecting out of our schools today calls for extraordinarily well-prepared school leaders and that we cannot get the job done without a strong internship program. We don't expect new doctors to be ready to practice their profession without hands-on, real-world training. There's no substitute for actual experience, and our principal candidates need their own brand of clinical training in real schools.

As universities work on the redesign of their educational leadership programs, we frequently hear that one of the real stumbling blocks is getting new courses or new programs approved through the university system. Have you been able to streamline that process at ETSU?

One thing we've done is put a lot of our curriculum revision work online. You can go to our Web site and enter "curriculum processes" and you will see everything being proposed in the way of curriculum revision or development, campuswide. All our committees go online to review proposals, and that has really accelerated our process, because we're not shuffling paper anymore. Also, our state Board of Regents has moved more of the curriculum decision making down to the institutional level.

The SREB Leadership Initiative has examined quite a few university leadership programs around the region and the nation, and we've rarely encountered a university faculty more willing to redesign its program to meet the demands of today's schools. Why is the ETSU faculty so receptive to change?

We've been about this work for a long time. Our first grants to support the development and redesign of our leadership programs came along more than a decade ago. So we've been thinking about what it means to be an effective leader in contemporary society for quite some time.

We also have a strong community focus. We don't perceive of ourselves as an institution that stands apart from its community. In the early 1990s, our university developed a continuous improvement process that we still use today. It helps us stay focused on our missions and keeps us looking for ways that we can keep improving and keep providing better service to the customer, which in our case is our community. As president, part of my job in this process is to remove the bureaucratic hurdles that often get in the way of the change process.

This university is very open to doing things differently if we see there is a better way. I think we have a genuine culture of high expectations here. We are embedded in our community and we have a driving commitment to serve our community. Being receptive to change is an important part of our identity as a university.

Dr. Paul Stanton is also Vice Chair of the SREB Board.